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FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9, Mark 10:13-16

". . . Let the little children come to me . . ." Mark 10-14 (NRSV)

Digging around in the ruins of an ancient Egyptian city, Oxyrhynchus, on the west bank of the Nile, about 120 miles south of Cairo, archeologists came upon what was apparently the town dump, and they discovered there a letter written on the 18th of June, one year before the birth of Jesus. The letter is one of those archeological prizes which produce clear insight into a particular dimension of life in a time very long ago. The writer of the letter is a Hilarion, a laborer, who has traveled with some companions to Alexandria to find work. He is writing to his wife whose name is Alis. From the content we know that Hilarion had more or less disappeared when he left Alis and their son, Apollonarion, to go to Alexandria. Alis became worried about her husband. When a friend, Aphrodisias, was planning to travel to the capital, Alis sent word of concern about his welfare and whereabouts — just in case Apollonarion might find him. Oh, and apparently there was a postscript to that message. Something has transpired or at least had become evident in Alis's life since her husband left. We don't have her letter but apparently it said, "Honey, get home! You're going to be a father again. I'm pregnant."

So this is the letter, written exactly 1,995 years ago on June 18. Hilarion begins by addressing Alis in Egyptian fashion as Sister.

> Hilarion to his sister Alis many greetings, likewise to my lady Berous (his mother-in-law, perhaps, who given the condition of her daughter was probably more than a little bit interested in her son-in-law's whereabouts) and to Apollonarion (their son). Know that we are even yet in Alexandria. Do not worry if they all come back (except me) and I remain in Alexandria. I urge and entreat you, be concerned about our son and if I should receive my wages soon, I will send them to you. If by chance you bear a son, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out. You have said to Aphrodisias, "Do not forget me." How could I forget you? Therefore I urge you not to worry. [*Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography,* John Dominic Crossan, p. 62-63]

Professor John Dominic Crossan, who has included this letter in his book, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography,* observes that Hilarion's letter is "tender to his pregnant wife but terrible to his unborn daughter."

> If by chance you bear a son, let it be — i.e. let it live. If it is a girl cast it out — to die.

The custom was brutal and widespread in the world of the Mediterranean in the first century. An infant was a nothing, a non-person, unless its father accepted it as a member of the family. If he chose not to, for whatever reason — Hilarion apparently simply didn't want a daughter — the infant was "exposed," which meant abandoned in the gutter or rubbish dump, to die, or to be picked up and raised as a slave.

That's what was going on in the world when Jesus of Nazareth came into Galilee proclaiming the existence and presence of a new reality which he called the Kingdom of God. The values and customs of his own Jewish people were very different. In their culture, children were very highly valued, regarded as a blessing of God, a sign of God's goodness. The Jews did not abandon children, but the Romans did, which means that the world in which the Christian Church began, certainly did.

When that church began, first in the Jewish cities, Jerusalem, Antioch, and then spread west into the cities of the gentiles, the Greeks, it needed to define itself in relationship to its surrounding culture.

And one of the questions the earliest Christian Church struggled with was what to do with the children, rticularly the infants and children who were simply abandoned by gentile parents, who, for whatever reason, didn't want them.

That's the background for one of the most memorable stories and certainly one of the loveliest scenes in the New Testament — Jesus and the children.

Mark says Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming a remarkable message: God's Kingdom is in your midst, he said, and you are all invited to be part of it. The Kingdom of God is not a place but a state of being, a way of living. It's living as if God were in charge of this world. So, the first thing is that everybody is eligible. It doesn't matter how rich or poor; your religious credentials don't matter or your social status. Your occupation doesn't matter, nor does your age or gender and, you see he's deeper and deeper in trouble with each of these inclusions. Nor does it matter that you have made some terrible mistake and wandered far from the straight and narrow. Nor does it matter even that you are crippled, or blind, or deaf, or paralyzed, or possessed, or sick with a dreaded social disease, all of which would have rendered you unfit, unacceptable, unclean . . . an outsider in the first century. Everybody is welcome in God's Kingdom. It's a Kingdom of "Nuisances and Nobodies" Crossan says and that's who responded and watched and listened and who then started to follow him around Galilee.

In the meantime the authorities in Jerusalem — political and religious — began to take notice, and before long those people in Jerusalem whose own power and position depend on domestic tranquility and degree of compliance with Roman reality, those people have cooked up a plot to discredit him and maybe even get rid of him. They'll send "truth squads" out to follow him around and ask tough, embarrassing questions and the idea is that as he stumbles around trying to answer he'll discredit himself, or if they're really lucky, he'll say something so outrageous, so blasphemous, that they can have him arrested.

About in the middle of Mark's account, this activity, this badgering by the Scribes and Pharisees, is increasing. So is the sense of conflict. The mood is changing. There is trouble ahead. The rolling green hills of Galilee are receding and the long rocky road to Jerusalem looms.

The Pharisees have been at him for days. The crowds of nuisances and nobodies are growing. Sick people are pulling at him, blind people are calling for him, people are carrying their aged and crippled dear ones to him. It's going on night and day and in the midst of it, these men from Jerusalem . . . Why are you eating with sinners, Jesus? Why don't your disciples wash their hands, Jesus? Why are you ignoring our Sabbath laws, and visiting the homes of outcasts and allowing unclean women to be seen around you? Why are you touching defiled flesh? And tell us, great teacher, what about the law — what about divorce for instance? Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife, the truth squad asked loudly and conspicuously in front of a clamoring crowd of needy people. And it's just at that moment that some parents decide to barge in with their children. They want him to touch them, Mark remembers.

It's a wonderfully chaotic and human moment. The sick people are demanding his attention, the Pharisees want to argue about divorce. Jesus has been trying desperately and unsuccessfully to tell his friends that things are going to be different, that there is trouble ahead and they need to be ready for it, but they aren't even listening to that. And just at that moment, here come the parents with their babies. The disciples see it coming and try to stop them. They "speak sternly." They say something like: "What do you mean coming here like this? Can't you see he's busy. Bring your kids back later. "

Jesus sees it and is indignant, not with the parents; certainly not with the children but with his disciples. They don't understand. The children are the point. They are far, far more important than the argument over theology and ethics the Pharisees are trying to promote. So he says, "Let them come — the kingdom belongs to them . . . you, all of you" — and I see him sweeping his gaze: proud Pharisees, the needy crowd, the parents of the babies, his disciples: "You have to receive this Kingdom as if you were a child." And then deliberately, quietly, gently, lovingly with the authority and power and love of Almighty God in him, "he took them in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them."

Professor Crossan says,

> Those are the official bodily actions of a father designating a newly born infant for life rather than death, for accepting it into his family rather than casting it out with the garbage.

And the people of the first century church who were the first to read this story, those people in the gentile cities of the Roman Empire, who were the ones for whom Mark wrote his account, knew that they had just learned something very important about God and life and the very basic nature of living faithfully. And they knew that they had some clear guidelines about children. They better get out into the streets and gutters first thing every morning and pick up the babies. And that's what they did. The whole idea of adoption into a family as a son and daughter: the very idea of orphanages — are ours. It was perhaps the first and original Christian social service ministry . . . gathering up discarded children.

The curious thing about American culture, *Time Magazine* observed in a special cover article, is that Americans cherish the *notion* that they cherish children more than they cherish their children. [October 8, 1990, "Suffer the Children," a cover article]

Say it till it sticks

The plight of nineteen Chicago children, abandoned in a cold and filthy apartment, sharing a few scraps of food with a dog, touched hearts all the way to Washington. But there was a part of that story that made me wonder and then made me angry. If I read it correctly, those children were not only abandoned by parents, they had been expelled from school because they had not received the required inoculations. School attendance — or school absence — under other circumstances might have alerted somebody to the tragedy. But the children weren't in school because they weren't inoculated. Parent's fault? Of course. They were too busy doing drugs. But is it necessary to put children at risk because parents don't act responsibly? Is there not a way to inoculate our children if the parents are negligent? Of course there is. But we don't like to pay for it.

I know a young man who decided to give a year after college to teaching in a school where needs are real and urgent. He chose New York City, the South Bronx, a junior high school. There was no art, no music, no drama, no counselors. He was also the track coach. There was no gym, no athletic field, no track. It's too dangerous to stay after school and anyhow the custodians all go home exactly at three o'clock. So track practice was at lunch hour, in the street, and his job was primarily to sweep the broken glass away so the youngsters could run.

Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund, is a passionate but seasoned advocate for children in our society. Our inattentiveness to their welfare poses the greatest simple threat to our nation's future, she argues.

to #4 p 4 9/28/97 "What is wrong w/ us

> One out of every five children in America is poor. If you are a preschooler, the odds are worse: one out of four is poor. One out of every three black or brown children is poor. Things happen to children every day in America that don't happen elsewhere. Every day three children die from abuse, nine are murdered, thirteen die from guns, twenty-seven die from poverty. A child growing up in America is fifteen times as likely to be killed by gunfire as a child growing up in Northern Ireland.
> [*Chicago Tribune*, "War Against Children Decried," 1/23/94]

– ~~the~~ Edman

On and on go the dreary statistics.

We know some answers, by the way. *Time Magazine* said that any economist can prove that spending on children is a bargain. One dollar spent for prenatal care for pregnant women saves three dollars in individual care during the first year of the infant's life; ten dollars down the road. We can provide nine months of free drug treatment to a pregnant woman who is addicted for $5,000, or we can pay $30,000 to care for the addicted baby she will bear, for twenty days.

We know what works. Education works. Good schools work: not exclusively in terms of test scores — that may take a while — but in terms of alternatives to drugs and crime. *The New York Times Magazine* several weeks ago ran a devastating pictorial essay comparing America's prisons and schools. "America's Best Buildings" it was called. In the past decade Congress and state legislatures have passed bundles of new laws mandating maximum terms for drug crimes, and sentencing guidelines that abolish parole and prison population shot up from 300,000 to 900,000 in ten years. Seventy percent of all the prison space in the nation has been built since 1985. Its purpose has been to combat crime. Three strikes and you're out is its current variation. Criminologists called it the "Aging Gangster's Retirement Housing Program." It will assure that you and I and our children continue to pay $16,000 to $20,000 per year to comfortably house criminals long after they pose any threat to anyone. The pictures showed gleaming gymnasiums, libraries, computer centers, cafeterias, in our new best buildings — our prisons — beside decaying, overcrowded, underfunded public schools.

We know what works. Head Start works. The economists say that one dollar spent on high quality preschool education saves an estimated $7.16 in later special education, crime, welfare and other costs. Yet, despite its cost effectiveness and profound impact, Head Start has never received enough funding to allow more than thirty-five percent of eligible children to attend.

Now this becomes fairly uncomfortable because we cherish the notion that we cherish the children. We Christians need to recall that day when our Lord undercut and subverted the mores and customs of his world by welcoming, by giving life to, by blessing the children. We sentimentalize the scene. It helped get him executed. It struck so deeply at the heart of the way his world acted that the authorities properly and accurately judged him a threat to the status quo and executed him.

It is not an inappropriate meddling in politics; it is an act of Christian faithfulness when we simply refuse to tolerate federal, state and local budgets for education and children's programs that are more of the same old thing.

Go out into the streets and gutters and pick up the babies was one of our first mission strategies. And so we do try and while it will never be enough, we do, with intentionality and commitment plan, fund, staff and carry out programs in—

- Tutoring for 475 youngsters
- Scholarships
- Summer Day School
- Pre-School
- Church School
- Center for Whole Life at Cabrini-Green
- Children's Choir
- Vacation Church School
- Nursery Care
- Mother's Cooperative
- Parent Effectiveness Training
- And in our newly recreated facilities, eighteen months from now, a new day care center for sixty children.

Jesus became indignant when his disciples prevented the children from coming to him. So I believe his followers could afford a little indignation on this issue, a little obnoxious advocacy for children, a little smart and tough political activism on behalf of the nuisances and nobodies who, we have on good authority, are already in the Kingdom of God.

to #9 P5, 9/28/97 If the child is safe, everyone is safe..

Professor Crossan warns that Mark's portrayal of Jesus is radically subversive, and it is. It is also radically personal. Just before he took the children in his arms and blessed them, he looked at the adults and said something stunning:

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Let's not forget that. Let's not sentimentalize that. He did not say that you have to be childish, or act childishly. He was talking to adults, all of whom were, at the moment, working very hard on their religion . . . the Pharisees, hammering away with their questions about orthodoxy, the Scribes probing his theology, the crowds pushing, clamoring, shoving, the disciples frowning, scolding, protecting him.

And the only ones available to him, the only ones quiet and still enough to be recipients of blessing were the children.

So, let's step back for a moment and put ourselves somewhere in that crowd of adults who for a variety of reasons found themselves fascinated by him and who had come to see and hear for themselves. Before we launch our campaign to save the world, let's get ready by seeing him.

It is when you and I stop trying and simply be in his presence, stop talking and listen, stop worrying about doing enough, earning enough, succeeding enough, providing enough . . . it is when we come empty handed, with nothing to offer but our hearts, our love, like children, that we become citizens of that blessed Kingdom of God, that family, that company of people who would follow him: men and women, the children: welcomed, affirmed, touched, blessed, by Jesus the Christ.

Be in his presence.

Hear his voice.

See him take the children in his arms.

Feel his touch.

Thanks be to God. Amen.